

Regional superintendents hang on, without pay

By Jim Nowlan

The 44 regional superintendents of education in Illinois are a hardy variety of the hybrid specimen “politico-professional.” Each time that Gov. Pat Quinn and others before him have tried to stamp out the superintendents, they have sprung right back up into full bloom.

Recently the governor tried a new tack—vetoing the pay for the superintendents. The superintendents have fought back with a lawsuit that claims the governor lacks the power to eliminate them by this tactic, as they are provided for in statute. Last week, a circuit court judge in Springfield sided with the governor, saying that indeed he the judge lacked the power to tell a governor what he could and could not veto.

Regional superintendents of education are elected on a partisan basis from districts that cover all counties with the exception of Cook, where the legislature eliminated the office a few years back when a superintendent was caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Prior to World War II, there were 15,000 school districts in Illinois, mostly one-room schools serving rural territory. The old county superintendent of schools was a necessary overseer of these schools and their often poorly-educated teachers. The county “soop” examined the teachers, certified those competent to teach and provided them with continuing education.

After the war, Illinois aggressively consolidated districts, closing most of the one-room schools. Today, we have 868 school districts, still more than most states. As a result of the consolidation efforts, and the growth of the teachers' universities that trained most of the teachers, there was little left for the rural county superintendent of schools who might oversee a single school district or just a few districts.

In the 1970s, I was named chair of a statewide commission to evaluate the county superintendent of schools. The state school superintendent who appointed us wanted the office eliminated. I recall that we recommended that the number be reduced to 57, with some having multiple counties to oversee, and thus "regional" rather than county level.

The questions about the office have always been about whether it served an important purpose, and whether the post should be political.

The regional superintendents do have a significant number of statutory duties: certify and license teachers and administrators; provide professional development and continuing education for teachers; inspect school buildings; handle truancy issues; conduct GED (general educational development) testing, and more. Each superintendent can also be entrepreneurial, seeking grants for early childhood programs and other needs perceived in the region's school districts.

If there were no regional superintendent offices, the Illinois State Board of Education would probably set up regional offices of its own, though fewer than 44, to handle the responsibilities.

In addition to seeing the sun set on regional superintendents, Gov. Quinn would also like to see the number of Illinois school districts reduced from 868 to about 300, and a strictly advisory commission is being established to look at that controversial issue.

My guess is that in October the legislature will overturn the governor's veto of the pay for regional superintendents, allowing them to be paid, albeit late. After all, this is a hardy variety of politico-professional.

The larger issues have to do with the appropriate structure for delivering education in Illinois most effectively and efficiently. We could probably do with fewer regional superintendents, and having them appointed by the state board of education would shorten our election ballot. And as I have written in an earlier column, we could also benefit from merging the separate grade and high school districts, where they still exist, into unified districts.